

Identifying essential strategies to maximize service-learning experiences in Mexico for undergraduate and graduate candidates: Faculty perspectives

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Abstract

With the current need for educators to enter and stay in the profession under the leadership of effective principals, it is essential to provide opportunities for preservice teachers and principal candidates to engage with diverse student populations. Candidates who participate in cultural immersion experiences can benefit personally and professionally, often gaining insight into the uniqueness of students who have backgrounds that are different from their own. Cultural experiences tied to service-learning may provide a more robust preparation as these candidates move toward their professional roles in K-12 public schools as future educators and principals. Furthermore, increasing candidates' cultural competence will provide a solid foundation as they instruct students from diverse backgrounds. During a recent service-learning trip, one that built on a previous pilot trip and extended opportunities through the inclusion of principal candidates, undergraduate and graduate candidates experienced what it is like to work with emergent bilingual students in grades EC-9 in a remote village in central Mexico. In reflecting after travel, the authors identified several key components that were selected for inclusion to ensure all candidates gained as much out of the experience as possible, including an understanding of what it is to be an emergent foreign-language speaker. These components, along with service-learning activities, will be described for those considering service-learning tied to travel abroad.

Keywords: *service-learning, cultural competence, high-impact practices, reflection*

Service-learning in higher education provides graduate and undergraduate students with opportunities to explore unfamiliar communities and engage in reciprocally valuable activities, leading to benefits for all stakeholders. Unlike traditional courses, service-learning can boost a student's university experience and enhance a "sense of personal and social responsibility" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 11). Furthermore, a sense of community engagement can be developed in candidates, which may extend beyond college. Service-learning is one of many activities that may foster student learning and promote critical reflection.

More universities across the United States are embedding high-impact practices (HIPs) into coursework, and these include writing intensive/instructive classes, undergraduate research opportunities, internships, capstone courses, and service-learning experiences. Hansen and Hahn (2022) noted that, among other things, participation in service-learning can have a positive impact on students' cultural

awareness. Along with benefits for all stakeholders, graduate and undergraduate students who participate in service-learning experiences may leave with a deeper understanding of how civic engagement assists communities and enhances their own academic performance (Jacoby, 2015).

Review of the Literature

There are many benefits associated with HIPs course participation as demonstrated by research (Zilvinskis et al., 2022). Students who do not enroll in a HIPs course may not have opportunities to tie their major field of study with practical applications that provide them with experiences to learn more about themselves and their communities. Likewise, some students may be unable to take part in a HIPs course. Hora et al. (2022) noted that first-generation and/or minority students needing to complete an internship as part of a graduation requirement may be unable to fulfill

the requirement because of heavy course load, working one or more jobs, and/or a lack of internship opportunities. Notably, internships “may represent yet another obstacle to social mobility as well as a vehicle for reproducing privilege and power” (Hora et al., 2019, p. 29-30).

Hora et al. (2022) argued that stakeholders need to think creatively about internships to increase access for all students to participate. Often, undergraduate students may be unaware of HIPs coursework. Likewise, if HIPs courses are not tied to major degree plans and are instead offered in elective or special topics courses, this may limit opportunities for underserved student populations to take advantage of the benefits associated with involvement. Still, participation in one or more HIPs coursework can increase retention/graduation rates and benefit students academically and socially (Zilvinskis et al., 2022). Thus, it is important to create opportunities for all college students to participate in one or more of these courses.

Although there are a variety of course designs for HIPs, service-learning aligns nicely with education courses. When done well (Jacoby, 2015), service-learning relies on all stakeholders having equal input into the design of a service-learning project to ensure mutual, reciprocal benefits. It is important that those providing a service reflect critically on what their goals are and what the needs of the other stakeholders involve. According to Jacoby (2015), critical reflection involves critical questions, which “challenge us to consider multiple perspectives and to recognize complexity in a situation or issue that may initially seem straightforward” (p. 27). For example, service learning might involve assisting in low SES areas by providing after-school tutoring, which seems straightforward. However, if transportation home does not allow students to stay after school for tutoring, then changes need to be made.

Rethinking how to provide a service when considering the needs of a community may be difficult, but not impossible. Doer (2015) noted that when researchers “presume a [social] border between the volunteer and the volunteered” it can “unwittingly reinscribe that very border, perpetuating class and sometimes race hierarchy” (p. 50) among those living within the same community. Doer called on researchers to reconstruct the ideas of volunteering and

service, so that ultimately it “may allow development of a society free of othering, where individuals work together in partnership” (p. 51).

There are all types of borders and boundaries, but when traveling to another country for service-learning under the assumption that everyone will benefit equally, there may be an instance of “othering”. Brons (2015) noted that our “sense of self-worth depends partially on the lesser worth of others; the boundaries of our in-groups depend on the clear exclusion of others as belonging to out-groups” (p. 84). Likewise, Jensen (2011), citing the works of Hegel and Spivak, noted that “the theory of identity formation inherent in the concept of othering assumes that subordinate people are offered, and at the same time relegated to, subject positions as others in discourse” (p. 65).

When people who may be perceived as privileged, for a variety of reasons, set forth with ideas to provide services to those who may be considered less privileged, careful consideration and critical thinking must be promulgated. This aligns with the idea of cultural competence, which includes a “set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations” (Cross et al., 1989, NP). Eden et al. (2024) noted that “recognizing and respecting the cultural backgrounds, experiences, and identities of students, educators, and communities” (p. 383) is an important component of cultural competence. When different cultures come together to support each other via service-learning, the privileged culture must value and respect the diverse backgrounds of those with whom they are engaging. Careful planning of activities and instructional methods that support a variety of learning styles and cultural preferences should be considered and employed (Eden et al., 2024).

Ensuring cultural competence among preservice teachers is necessary. Schools continue to become more diverse as teachers remain primarily white, middle-class, and female (NCES). Romijn et al. (2021) conducted a review of the literature on professional development aimed at increasing in-service teachers’ intercultural competence; and the

authors noted that a teacher's readiness for a classroom can hinge on an understanding of the importance of culturally responsive teaching, as well as a recognition and awareness of other cultures. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002) is embedded in many Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) to ensure preservice teachers are prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners. Gay (2002) argued that EPPs should be preparing preservice teachers "with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills" (p. 106) to support diverse students.

Another form of service-learning reflection can involve media and artistic creation (Jacoby, 2015). Preservice teachers may be tasked with embedding creativity into content learning for K-12 students; at the same time, their service-learning reflections could involve artistic creation that allows them an alternative way to critically reflect on their experiences. Art may provide opportunities for expression when language differences exist. When learning is occurring, but words are difficult, art can be used to express comprehension of content. Importantly, allowing freedom of expression through art to support content learning can provide a layer of cultural competence for all stakeholders. Additionally, when service-learning takes place in a foreign country, surrounding undergraduate and graduate candidates with the cultural art of a foreign country may provide opportunities for reflection on prior perceptions.

Background

Colleges of Education often find that service-learning aligns with their program learning outcomes, thus making it more seamless to embed service-learning opportunities into coursework. All preservice teachers spend time in clinical teaching or residency in K-12 schools under the guidance of a certified educator. Likewise, principal candidates spend time under the mentorship of a school principal. Still, university coursework that provides opportunities to engage with K-12 students outside of public education can provide a plethora of benefits, including opportunities for critical reflection that promote: (1) increased empathy, (2) enhanced responsiveness, (3) critical decision making, and (4) interactions with diverse learners outside of instructional settings.

This service-learning was designed to provide opportunities for candidates to be immersed in a culture that might provoke critical thinking and deep self-reflection.

Undergraduate and graduate students in a program of study in education took part in a service-learning trip to central Mexico during the summer. Three faculty were engaged with university students as they developed literacy, history, science, and technology lessons for emergent bilingual students in a remote village in central Mexico. Although service-learning activities can be embedded in a variety of college courses, activities in this experience directly tied to graduate and undergraduate students' major areas of study. When planning the travel, the authors focused on art enriching experiences for all stakeholders in this service-learning experience in Mexico.

Following the work of Doer (2015), the premise of this study focused on individuals working together in partnership from the start of planning. Although this service-learning was focused on reciprocal benefits for all stakeholders, the authors understand that their own biases and preconceived notions may interfere with this benevolent idea. Likewise, candidates who are focused on their own understanding of what it is to provide education, and to be educated, may also bring their inherent privilege and bias to those they are "othering", not with malice, but with the intention of benefitting the other in some manner associated with their own ideas.

For example, if preservice teachers were placed at a Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) for service-learning, they may have some personal opinions about an after-school program at a BGCA. Ensuring preservice teachers are faced with critical questions and opportunities for reflection during this process allows candidates to "process the dissonance they may find between their expectations and the reality of their experience" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 27). So, travel to central Mexico may evoke certain expectations for undergraduate and graduate students living in the southwest United States. However, their perceived expectations and ultimate experiences may provide opportunities to confront potential bias or inaccurate information.

This trip was a follow-up to a pilot study from a prior year (Casey et al., 2022). For two faculty members, this was a

return trip with a solid understanding of expectations and activities. However, there were still lessons to be learned.

Service-Learning and Cultural Immersion Activities

During the planning phase, the authors wanted to ensure candidates had opportunities for a wide variety of experiences. Although the primary purpose of travel was to work with emergent bilingual children, it was important that candidates were immersed in local culture, art, and architecture. Thus, identifying unique experiences before,

Figure 1

Image of Cathedral in San Miguel de Allende, pyramid, and a view of the city.



Note: The pyramid is approximately an hour from San Miguel de Allende

during, and after service learning was an essential component. Jacobs (2022) noted that during service-learning involving the arts, “critical service-learning has the potential to create change by combining theories and knowledge about a social issue and its root causes with lived experiences, which helps to shape students’ understandings” (p. 33). Tying the arts and art activities into reflection provides non-traditional ways for students to process their experiences, and that occurred during this service-learning opportunity. The trip to Mexico was saturated with the arts. Principal and preservice teacher candidates were surrounded by art, culture, and history in an expat community that was approximately 15 miles from a town where the service-learning activities took place. Faculty arranged for graduate and undergraduate students to travel to museums, mines, cathedrals, pyramids, artisan shops, and a variety of restaurants (Figure 1). Travelers were inundated with unique cultural experiences during the weekends and evenings, while they worked with local elementary children during the day. From Monday through Friday, undergraduate and graduate students worked at a one-room schoolhouse for approximately four hours each

morning, with anywhere from 25 to 40 students showing up each day. The school was located in a town accessed via dirt roads (Figure 2). The town’s children willingly walked long distances, often unaccompanied, to a one-room schoolhouse to participate in learning activities.

Figure 2

Images of a street in the town and the students gathered for the morning message.



Note: Songs were always part of the morning routine.

Due to the number of children, activities were arranged inside and outside, with tables moved to accommodate for necessary materials and differing ages. The outside area was unpaved, without any grass; and the wind would pick up the dirt occasionally and cover everything with a fine dust. A blue tarp was rigged to provide some shade from the heat of a July sun. For every EC-9 student present at the school, the critical and most desirable part of a lesson involved the arts. Simple crayons and paper were a luxury most students did not have in their homes (Figure 3). Thus, artistic experiences were embedded in each instructional learning activity for all EC-9 students attending the summer school.

Figure 3

Images inside and outside of the one-room schoolhouse.



Note: Lessons inside the school were more structured.

Undergraduate and graduate students worked to incorporate aspects of both cultures, the volunteers and the volunteered, into each lesson. For example, after each science lesson, elementary students recorded their data and drew images representing their findings, writing and labeling in both languages. After literacy lessons, elementary students used crafts to create works of art that were tied to the content but represented their unique background, again writing in both languages to represent the learning. Some of the embedded arts activities seemed to promote more active learning of content. This provided an excellent opportunity for candidates to critically reflect on activities they developed for students in the school.

The trip to Mexico involved cultural experiences and service-learning opportunities. However, college students traveling to Mexico were faced with a great deal of dissonance. The planned cultural activities would have them dining in a four-star restaurant one evening and working with children living in, what the privileged would

seemed harsh at times. Public transportation to and from the village was almost nonexistent due to the crude dirt roads, and this impacted daily life for the children and their families. Oftentimes when leaving the school for the day, there was excitement among the college students for upcoming events, but also an air of sadness that the children would not be taking part in excursions. Bonds between the college students and the children were formed during the service-learning.

Faculty Reflections

As each author reflected separately about this experience, four components emerged that were associated with positive outcomes for the undergraduate and graduate candidates; and faculty believed these were critical components of the service-learning involved in this experience. These included: (1) pre-planning meetings; (2) cultural immersion; (3) cultural competence; and (4) after-action meetings. An understanding of the importance of each element emerged over the course of a nine-day, intensive service-learning and cultural immersion trip. Although service-learning was the focus, identifying student supports and reflection as an integral part of the learning is vital in planning for future trips. Each area will be described and discussed.

Many of the undergraduate and principal candidates felt prepared to work with bilingual students because they worked with them in their local schools. However, providing instruction to pre-emergent bilingual students in a remote village in Mexico, with limited access to technology, world events, cities within their own vicinity, public library access, shopping centers, etc., proved to be a new and challenging experience for all candidates on this trip. Critical reflection after each lesson often provided candidates and faculty with opportunities to identify their own cultural biases. While is easy to identify supports that might improve the lives of students attending the school, it is another thing to understand how those students and their families may not see a need to make changes. Taking time to reflect on another person's perspective, in this case the children and their families living in the village, can prevent misunderstandings.

Figure 4
Images of the streets of San Miguel de Allende.



Note: There were many doors and streets filled with flowering trees and murals.

describe as, poverty the next morning. The differences between the impoverished village and the wealthy surrounding areas were palpable. Nonetheless, the areas visited were reflections of many other cities and states in Mexico. Although flowering plants, trees, and flowers were seen throughout the various places visited, the wealthier cities had streets covered with art and flowers, enhancing the environment and overall experience (Figure 4). Nonetheless, all planned activities were a valuable part of the trip because it allowed for a realistic experience and promoted opportunities for critical self-reflection. Still, the juxtaposition of the village, a mere 15 miles from the city,

Pre-planning Meetings

Participating in pre-planning meetings is, perhaps, the most essential part of preparing for travel. Candidates taking part in this travel experience were heading to a new destination; and although several of the students had traveled to Mexico before, it was for the purpose of vacation in a more touristy area. Thus, preparing preservice and principal candidates to work with young children whose first language was Spanish took several months and included individual and group meetings, in virtual and face-to-face settings.

The pre-planning for lessons had to incorporate learning opportunities, while also considering the long-term impacts. Candidates were asked to consider whether the learning opportunity was going to benefit students' lives or was the lesson geared more toward American education and/or culture. For example, preservice-teacher and principal candidates were prepared to address standards found on K-12 state assessments. However, lessons developed to provide a meaningful benefit to students living in a remote part of Mexico needed a different focus. Although faculty helped support the lesson development in the preplanning meetings, it was novice and experienced teachers who collaboratively organized, sequenced, and delivered instruction over the school week. Ultimately, the lesson preparation and instructional time at the school were the highlights of the high-impact practices implementation.

Cultural Immersion

Cultural immersion experiences can transform participants' perceptions of self and others (Onosu, 2021). A valuable part of any cultural immersion experience involves understanding the importance of the rich history of a country and how that history led to the cultural norms seen in local communities. During this experience, faculty and candidates were able to explore authentic foods, local art, historical landmarks, and architecture.

While some destinations were filled with tourists, there was travel that included remote parts of the state with few tourists around (Figure 5). Preparing for excursions beyond the local tourist attractions may benefit undergraduate and graduate students taking part in service-learning when traveling outside the United States. One trip to a mine was quite different than what would have been allowed in the

United States. A visible lack of safety restrictions in some areas visited, restrictions that might have been mandatory in the states, did not appear to bother any of the local towns people. There was never a time where there was a concern for personal safety; it was more a comparison of cultural differences in expectations when visiting historic sites in the United States and Mexico. A key component in building cultural competence is understanding that foreign countries have procedural safeguards in place that were made to keep citizens safe, just as in the United States.

Figure 5
Images of the excursion of a mine and pyramid.



Note: No one entered or exited the mine using the ladder.

Cultural Competence

Nero (2018) concluded that study-abroad can enhance cultural competence in preservice teachers; and although this was not a study-abroad trip, it was service-learning that took place in a foreign country. Culture competence was embedded in this service-learning experience from the preplanning meetings through the selected activities. Students were encouraged to assess each lesson they developed with a critical lens, carefully attending to the development of lessons that would support student learning and instructional goals in a culturally competent manner. This included a strong focus on recognizing the difficulties in learning a second language. For example, it was important that the graduate and undergraduate students spoke in Spanish to the students they were instructing. This was a new and sometimes uncomfortable experience for the college students, but there was support for them in this process; and it provided them with an understanding of what the elementary and middle school students were experiencing when they were asked to respond/repeat in English during a lesson.

Likewise, selecting literacy books which included both languages in the text, and then reading the texts in both languages, supported the growth of all stakeholders. An extension of this was having the college students speak in Spanish when shopping at the local market and use local currency to purchase items and make change. This was sometimes more difficult because they were engaging in interactions with adults rather than elementary and middle school children.

Goals selected by the team of travelers included leaving an educational footprint within the community without leaving an American cultural footprint. It is important to evaluate outcomes from all stakeholders to include the travelers, host communities, program, and elementary students (Onosu, 2021). This can be a difficult task because the idea of othering can occur; and though serving a community can be impactful, the needs of a community must be considered as the primary goal over the needs of those performing a service.

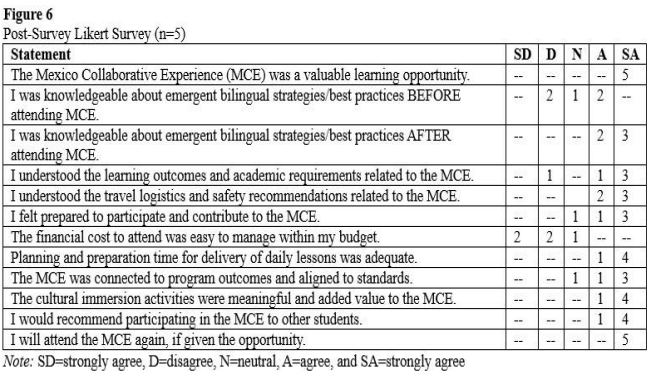
After-action Meetings

Meeting with candidates immediately after conducting activities in the schools proved to be an essential part of critical reflection. Instruction at the village school typically lasted four hours, with the morning spent preparing materials to transport to the school. The bus ride back to the compound was a time for thoughtful reflections; there were limited conversations after engaging in intense instructional activities for three to four hours. However, there were still conversations with a whisper of the good this service-learning was providing to the children. This othering of the volunteered provided a critical lens to discuss privilege and the idea of the “other”. Jacobs (2022) noted that “framing service-learning as an opportunity for reciprocal learning is more valuable and has less potential to bring harm to the community that one is trying to serve” (p. 34). Pushing into personal expectations of what is the best outcome in a given situation can prove difficult, because it forces one to face the idea that perhaps a long-held idea may be incorrect; in the end, understanding the unique cultural expectations of a community may broaden one’s own thought processes; and this was the focus during discussions after leaving the children each day.

After the bus ride from the village back to the dormitories, candidates met to debrief; and all candidates were able to share immediate first response reflections based on emotions and energy. There were highs of outcomes like “did you see that spark in the child’s eyes” and “did you hear their correct responses; the children got it”. There were also a lot of comparisons between “how they do it” and “how we do it”, and again, preventing the idea of othering was key. The first author lived overseas as a child, teenager, and adult; and she would sometimes insert critical questions about cultural differences such as: “Is one way better than the other?” or “Did you learn a new way to look at this?” After thoughtful reflection, students were able to discuss how they will apply what they learned teaching pre-emergent bilingual students in Mexico with their own future classrooms/schools.

Post-trip Survey Data

Upon returning stateside, undergraduate and graduate students received a Likert survey (Likert, 1932) developed by the second author (Figure 6). All authors wanted to determine how the undergraduate and graduate candidates perceived the activities in the service-learning experience.



The Likert scores demonstrate that after the service-learning experience, the participants felt more prepared and knowledgeable about working with emergent bilinguals. Likewise, all five students agreed that the experience was valuable, and they would return if offered another opportunity. Interestingly, although all five participants strongly agreed that they would return, one student only agreed that they would recommend the program to others. On the question: “The financial cost to attend was easy to

manage within my budget”, two students strongly disagreed, two students disagreed, and one student was neutral. Finding funds to support travel is an important factor to consider.

The survey also included three qualitative questions: (1) What was the most valuable event, experience, or activity? Why?; (2) What was the least valuable event, experience, or activity? Why?; and, (3) What are two improvements that you would recommend? On the first question, all participants wrote that working with the children was the most valuable experience, with one student writing: “The most valuable would be the engagement and interactions with the students and learning about their culture. And the immersion of the Mexican culture/language was a wonderful experience”.

On question three, students has a variety of suggestions, including: (a) “To have an aligned curriculum for students- so that it flows from one group to another”; (b) “I would also recommend more focused planning and preparation prior to the trip” (c) “More down time to rest and enjoy the beautiful hacienda”; and (d) “have some time to reflect and enjoy ourselves”. On the first suggestion, this could be difficult because the students who showed up on Monday may not be the same students who show up Tuesday. As far as more focused planning, that is more easily done after you taken part in the experience and understand what to expect. However, if students who have taken part in the service learning assisted in preparing future participants, that could add to the overall preparation and planning.

On the second question, the least valuable experience, one student felt that “the lunch meal was repetitive and the schedule was super tight”; another student wrote that they “loved the informational talks in the evenings, [but] sometimes we were just tired”. Overall, students were positive about the experiences and provided some ideas for making improvements for future trips.

Limitations

One primary limitation is the small number of student-participants: undergraduate (n=1) and graduate (n=4). Financial cost was one of the primary reasons there were not more participants. The total cost for participants, which included lodging, public transportation, airfare, and 85% of

meals for the nine-day trip was approximately 2000 dollars. All students received stipends from 500-2000 dollars depending on undergraduate (\$2000) or graduate (\$500) status to offset travel expenses out of available grant funds. However, grant funds eventually run out, and students must come up with funds for travel. Costs of travel will always be a limitation because some students will be able to afford the costs, while others will not. As noted by Hora et al. (2022), minority and first-generation students who already experience barriers to HIPs courses will have costs as one additional, potential barrier.

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

Overall, this trip provided several benefits to faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and children attending the summer school. The benefit to faculty and college students was immersion in a foreign country where the primary language was not English. Having to speak a foreign language to instruct students, purchase items, get directions, etc. can bring a sense of apprehension. It is one thing to have a Spanish phrase memorized when approaching a merchant; it is another thing entirely to have that vendor respond in rapid Spanish and not understand what they are saying. However, this forces one to consider: (1) why an emergent bilingual student may need many language supports in a classroom; and, (2) how emergent bilingual students may stress over speaking English in front of their peers. It also brings a sense of awareness to faculty who teach methods classes focused on instructional supports for English learners.

The primary goal for the children, a goal sought by parents of the children, was for them to learn more English vocabulary words and be taught in English. Students who speak English in this area of Mexico are more likely to be hired by a larger company, thus improving outcomes for themselves and their families. Lessons in English supported this goal. The primary goal for the undergraduate and graduate students was to develop strong self-efficacy in planning lessons with a focus on cultural competence to support the needs of diverse learners. Developing lessons that incorporated a dual language approach supported this goal. Through directly working with emergent bilinguals, requiring support in communicating with parents and their children, and speaking Spanish with young learners, the

undergraduate and graduate students had a better understanding of communication struggles that their future parents and children may face.

When possible, service-learning abroad can enhance the cultural competence of preservice teachers and principal candidates. Ensuring critical conversations that address othering should be built into pre-travel preparation plans. In future trips, pre and post Likert surveys will be used to gain a better understanding of students' growth in cultural competence. Finally, finding ways to support the learning of the volunteers and volunteered is essential. The purpose of service-learning is a mutually beneficial partnership where all stakeholders have input (Jacoby, 2015).

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